



The Walking Drum

Louis L'Amour

The
WALKING
DRUM

Louis L'Amour

BANTAM BOOKS

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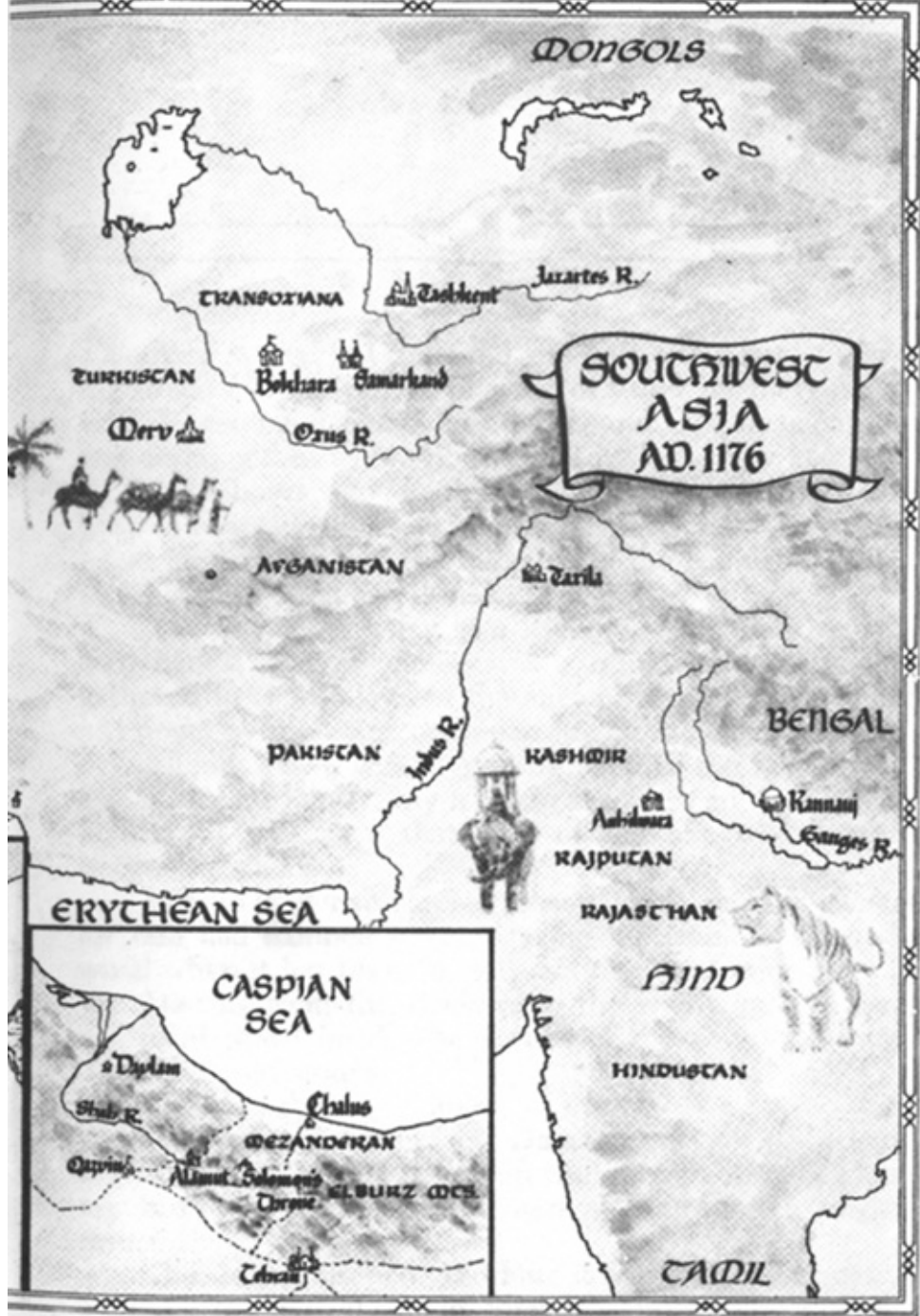
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To Lou and Emily Wolf







Chapter 1

NOTHING MOVED BUT the wind and only a few last, lingering drops of rain, only a blowing water off the ruined wall. Listening, I heard no other sound. My imagination was creating foes where none existed.

Only hours ago death had visited this place. This heap of charred ruins had been my home, and the night ago I had lain staring into the darkness of the ceiling, dreaming as always of lands beyond the sea.

Now my mother lay in a shallow grave, dug by my own hands, and my home was a ruin where rainwater gathered in the hollows of the ancient stone floor, a floor put down by my ancestors before my memory began.

Already dawn was suggesting itself to the sky. Waiting an instant longer, my knife held low in my fist, I told myself, "I will have that gold or kill any who comes between it and me."

Fire no longer smoldered among the fallen roof beams, for rain had damped it out, leaving the smell of charred wood when it has become wet, and the smell of death.

Darting from the shadows to the well coping, I ran my hand down inside the mouth of the well, counting down the cold stones.

Two...three...four...*five!*

With the point of my fine Damascus dagger, I worked at the mortar. Despite the damp chill, perspiration beaded my brow. At any time the men of Tournemine might return.

The stone loosened. Working it free with my fingers, I lifted it to the well coping. Sheathing my knife, I ran my fingers into the hole, feeling for the box my father had hidden there. They touched wood. Gently, carefully, I drew it from the hole, a small box of strange-smelling wood. Then from behind me, a soft footfall!

Turning, I saw that a dark figure loomed before me. So large a man could only be Taillefeur, lieutenant to the Baron de Tournemine, a veteran of mercenary wars.

"So!" Taillefeur was pleased. "I was right! The old wolf hid treasure, and the cub has returned for it."

“It is nothing,” I lied, “some trifles my father left me.”

“Let me have those trifles”—Taillefeur extended his hand—“and you can be on your way. Let Tournemine hunt his own children.”

The night was cold. The wind chilled my body beneath the rain-soaked clothing. Nearby a large drop fell into a puddle with a faint *plop*.

Among those who stopped at the house of my father over the years had been a lean and savage man with a knife-scarred, pockmarked skin. Grasping my arm with fingers that bit into my flesh like claws, he grinned a lopsided grin and advised, “Trust to your wits, boy, and to your good right hand.”

He had emptied his glass, leering. “And if you’ve a good left and some gold, that helps, too!”

My left—my left hand rested upon the stone I had removed from the well coping.

Boy I might be, but I was tall and strong as a man, dark as an Arab from the sun, for I was not long from the fishing banks beyond Iceland where I had gone with men from the isle of Brehat.

“If I give you the box,” I said as I gripped the stone tighter, “you will let me go?”

“You are nothing to me. Give me the box.”

He reached a hand to receive it, and I swung the stone.

Too late, Taillefeur threw up his arm to ward off the blow. He saved himself a crushed skull, but the blow felled him in his tracks.

Leaping over his body, I fled to the moors, and for the second time in a few hours the moors were my saving.

What boy does not know the land of his boyhood? Every cave, every dolmen, every dip in the land and hole in the hedges, and all that lonely, rockbound coast for miles.

There I had played and imagined myself in wars, and there I could run, dodge, and elude. As I had run that afternoon to evade the men of Tournemine, so I ran now.

Behind me Taillefeur staggered to his feet. He got up and, groggy from my blow, staggered into the wall. I heard him curse. He must have glimpsed me running, because he gave a great shout and started after me.

Dodging into a hollow choked with brush, I scrambled through a tunnelloike passage known to the wolves and boys, and as the storm clouds were scattering like sheep to feed on the meadow of the sky, I came again to the cove.

The ship was there. The crew was ashore filling casks with water, and when they saw me coming, two of them drew swords and a third nocked an arrow to his bowstring, looking beyond to see if I was

accompanied.

It was a squat, ill-painted vessel with a slanting mast and a single bank of oars, nothing like the sleek black ships of my father, who was a corsair.

The two who held swords advanced, looking fiercer when they realized I was but a boy, and alone.

“I would speak with your captain,” I said.

They indicated a squat man, running somewhat to fat, in a dirty red cloak. His skin was swarthy, his eyes deep-sunk and furtive. I liked not the look of him and would have withdrawn had not the men Tournemine been behind me, and searching.

“A boy!” He spoke impatiently.

“But a tall boy,” one of them assured him, “and a strong lad, too!”

“Where do you sail?” I asked.

“Where the wind takes us.” He eyed me with no favor, yet with a measuring quality in his glance.

“To Cyprus, perhaps? Or Sicily?”

He gave me quick attention, for such places were known to few but wandering merchants and Crusaders. But we upon this coast of Brittany were born to the sea. We were descendants of the Veneti, those Celtic seafaring men who, with their Druid priests, refused tribute to Rome and defied the legions of Julius Caesar.

“What do you know of Cyprus?” he sneered.

“My father may be there. I seek him.”

“It is a far place. What would a father of yours be doing there?”

“My father,” I said proudly, “is Kerbouchard!”

They were astonished, as I expected, for the ships of Kerbouchard harried the coasts; attacking the ships of many nations, trading beyond the farthest seas. My father’s name was legend.

“Your voyage would be useless. By the time you came to Cyprus, he would have sailed.”

There were lessons I had yet to learn, and one was not to talk too much. “His ship has been sunk and my father has been killed or sold into slavery. I must find him.”

The captain seemed relieved, for no man wishes to incur the displeasure of Kerbouchard, and I knew what he planned to do. Tall I was, and broader of shoulder than all but two of his crew.

“Ah? If you sail, will you work or pay?”

“If the price be not too great, I will pay.”

The men of the crew edged nearer, and I wished for a sword. Yet what choice remained? I must escape with them or face the dogs of Tournemine.

“I could offer a piece of gold,” I suggested.

“You would eat that much!” he said contemptuously, but his hard little eyes sharpened.

“Two pieces?”

“Where would a boy lay his hands upon gold?”

His sudden gesture took me by surprise, and before I could move to resist, I had been seized and thrown to the ground. Despite my struggles, the box was torn from my shirt and broken open. Bright gold spilled upon the sand, and some of the coins rolled, setting off a greedy scramble.

The captain took the gold from their reluctant fingers to be divided among the crew. “Take him aboard,” he commanded. “He has paid his way, but he shall work also or taste the whip.”

My knife was jerked from its sheath by a moonfaced man with unkempt hair, who belted it. Him I would not forget. Damascus blades were hard to come by, and this was a gift from my father.

“You’ve learned something,” the captain said, maliciously. “Never show your money before strangers. But do your work, and you shall live to see Sicily. I know a Turk there who will pay a prettily high price for such a handsome lad.” He grinned at me. “Although you may not long be a lad after he lays his hands upon you.”

Bruised and battered I was, but when my foot touched the deck a thrill went along my spine. Yet when taken to my place at the slaves’ bench, and seeing the filth in which I must work, I tried to fight. That men could exist in such evil conditions seemed impossible, although there was little cleanliness in the houses along our coast, other than in my father’s house.

He had traveled in Moslem lands in Africa and Spain, and brought to our house not only their rich fabrics but their way of living and their love of hot baths.

Shackled to my oar, I looked about me with distaste. How long I could endure this I had no idea, yet a time would come when I would learn how much a man can endure and yet survive. The condition of these galley slaves was abject, and I pitied them, and myself as well. Their backs bore evidence of what happened when their overseer walked along the benches with his whip.

Our craft demanded two men to each oar, and shackled beside me was a burly, red-haired ruffian. “You fought little,” he said with contempt. “Have the Celts grown so weak?”

I spat blood. “The ship goes to Sicily, where I wish to go. Besides,” I added, “death awaits me ashore.”

His hard laugh told me that, whatever the whip had done to the others, he still possessed spirit and strength. “If they get there!” he said cynically. “This lot knows little of fighting and less of seafaring. It will be a God’s wonder if they do not drown all of us.”

Red Mark he was called. “Have a care,” he warned. “That brute on the runway is quick with the lash. Bend to your work, or he will have the hide off.”

“My name is Kerbouchard,” I said, and the saying of it made me sit a little straighter.

“It is a name with a sound to it,” he admitted.

A little pompously, for I was young, I told him who my father was. “Men of my family were captains among the Veneti when they fought Caesar, and it is said there was a Kerbouchard among the monks who welcomed the Vikings when they first came to Iceland.”

“A ship does not sail with yesterday’s wind,” Red Mark replied. “I know what Breton corsairing men have done, but what of *you*?”

“Ask me that question five years from now. I shall have an answer for you then.”

Four years had gone since my father set forth on his voyage of trading and raiding, for piracy was the business of all ships when opportunity offered. The men of Brittany had been corsairs as long as ships had sailed on the deep waters.

As for myself, I had but returned from a voyage with the men of Brehat to the fishing grounds in the far west. Those months at sea had put muscles in my arms and shoulders and taught me how to live and work with men.

Returning home, I found our horses stolen, our flocks driven off, and that two of my father’s oldest retainers had been set upon and murdered near Brignogan.

When my father was at home Tournemine trembled in his castle, for my father would have hurled Tournemine by his heels from his own battlements. Yet try as I might, I could raise no men against him. Frightened they were, and cautioned, “Wait until your father returns.”

When next Tournemine came, my mother and I met him at our gate with four strong men beside us and two with arrows ready. We were too eager for his taste, so he threatened only, demanding tribute and promising to burn our place about our ears.

“Come when you will,” my mother spoke proudly. “Soon Kerbouchard will be here to greet you.”

His was a taunting laugh. “Think you I have not heard? He was killed fighting the Moors off the shores of Cyprus!”

This I repeated to Red Mark in whispers, and told how one day I had returned to find my mother murdered and my home in flames.

Mad with grief, I had sprung from behind a hedge and flung myself at Tournemine; only a quick move had saved his life. As it was, my blade laid open his cheek, showering him with blood. Astonished by the suddenness of my attack, his men failed to react, and I escaped, although my freedom proved to be short-lived.

OUR GALLEY SAILED south, and over the next weeks I saw what Red Mark spoke was truth. They were not seamen. They blundered and wasted the wind. Fearful of losing sight of the shore they endangered themselves needlessly. Avoiding large ships, they preyed upon fishing boats and small villages, even murdering shepherds to steal sheep from the hill pastures.

The captain was called Walther, but of the crew we saw only Mesha, the brute who walked the runway with his lash.

On my mother's side, I descended from a long line of Druids, and I myself had received the training. From my earliest days I had been instructed in the ritual, so secret it was never written. Art was learned by rote, for Druids were known for their fantastic memories, trained from birth.

Among the Celts a Druid took precedence over kings. The Druids were priests of a sort, but with men, magicians and advisers to kings, keepers of the sacred knowledge. During my long days at the oar, I drowned my misery by repeating in my mind the ancient runes, the ritual and the sagas of our people, remembering as well our knowledge of wind, water, and the flight of birds.

Each pull upon the oar brought me nearer to Sicily and my father—if he lived. If he was indeed dead, I must know, and if it was aid he needed, I must be strong to help him.

Outside, the hull rustled the waters, scant inches from our naked bodies. Red Mark and I teamed well, each learning to spare the other.

Our captors were a mixed bag of ruffians, none of them men of the sea. Each night they anchored lying often a whole day through, loafing and drinking. The fishermen of Brehat with whom I sailed the cold outer seas were daring men, not such petty rascals as these. With those fishermen I had followed the gray geese from Malin Head in Scotia beyond the green land to unknown shores.

Navigation I knew well, and not only by stars but by the sea's currents, the blowing of winds, the flight of birds, and the fish. These things I kept to myself and bided my time.

“Together,” Red Mark said one day, “we might be free.”

FOR DAYS WE edged along the coasts of France and then of Spain. Off the coast of Africa w

attacked and captured a small Arab merchantman.

Red Mark was contemptuous. "Cowards! They attack nothing that is not helpless! Even Walther, for all his big shoulders and loud mouth, is a coward."

An Arab prisoner from the captured ship was put at an oar ahead of me, and the man beside him was a Moor also. Knowing a few words of the language, I exchanged greetings, and thinking to learn the tongue, I began to listen and to practice. The few words learned before had come from an escaped prisoner of the Moors, a seaman on my father's vessel.

A night came when we turned back along the coast of Spain. One of the crew was a renegade, a thief driven from his village, and he offered to guide Walther to it. The galley was short of bread and meat and the village, sparsely armed. Leaving guards, the crew took their weapons and went ashore.

An hour before dawn they staggered back drunk, dragging behind them a few miserable women and girls, leaving the village to hold the torch of its burning against the sky.

Red Mark ground his teeth and swore, memory lying cold upon him. His own village had been taken in just this way while he lay in a drunken sleep.

The crew no sooner staggered aboard than they cast off, fearful of reprisal. The sail was partly lifted, and the galley made slight headway upon the dark water, but with the rising sun, an offshore breeze filled the sail. With the wheel lashed the crew lay about in a drunken stupor while we rested on our oars, whispering among ourselves.

The wind freshened, and the vessel moved out upon the sea. Red Mark grinned at me. "This will put water into their knees! The lousy bunch of coasters!"

They sprawled on the deck like dead men, their bodies moving slightly with the roll of the galley.

There was a slight movement as one of the village women worked herself from under a man's heavy arm. She moved with infinite caution, and we, who could see but little of the deck, held our breath in hope for her. We who were in chains watched her who was free, wondering what she would do and hoping she would do something.

Her face was bruised and swollen from blows. She got to her feet, then drew his knife ever so gently from its scabbard, then she knelt beside the man and drew back the sheepskin jacket.

Ah, but this one knew where a man's heart lay! She lifted the knife high, then plunged it down.

His knees jerked, then relaxed slowly. She cast the knife away and went to the rail. She looked once toward the shore, not too distant yet, then dove over.

"She's drowning herself!" I protested.

"Maybe...yet it might be she will make it."

We peered past our oars and watched the sunlight flash upon her arms as she swam.

We never knew. The offshore breeze strengthened, and the galley moved out upon the sunlit water.

I wanted to believe she made the shore. The galley was five, perhaps six miles off the shore, but she was a strong-built wench with courage.

The deeper roll of the vessel started a cask moving. It banged against a bulwark, then rolled among us. Eagerly, the slaves bashed in the head of the cask and passed along their cups for the strong red wine.

Ah! There was a draft fit for men! The strong wine ran down my parched gullet, warming the muscles of my throat and setting my heart to pounding. It was a true wine, a man's wine, filled with authority.

We emptied the cask among us and tossed it over the side. Never had I been one for strong drink, but it was this or something which made me realize the wind that blew the vessel seaward might be a fresh wind for my fortunes.

With satisfaction I felt the roll become deeper, the wind stronger. Behind us the shoreline vanished.

A few drops of rain fell. One of the crew wiped a hand across his face and sat up. He stared stupidly at the sky, where clouds were now appearing, then a look of alarm flashed across his face and he leaped to his feet so suddenly he almost lost balance and fell. He grasped the bulwark and stared aghast, at the deep-rolling sea beginning to be flecked with whitecaps.

He shouted, then he ran to Walther and shook him awake. Walther, angry at being suddenly awakened, struck out viciously. Then as the import of the man's words penetrated his awareness, he staggered to his feet. The crew scrambled up, too, staggering and falling and staring wildly at the empty sea.

They were far at sea; a storm was blowing up, and they had no idea in which direction lay the land.

Walther stared at the horizons. The sky was becoming overcast. No sun was visible.

"Now look!" Red Mark was pleased. "He has lost the land and has no idea which way to turn!"

Walther came along the runway among the slaves. Some of them must have been awake and would have noticed the vessel's course. He wished to ask, but dared not. He feared they might deliberately give him a wrong answer.

The galley wallowed in the sea, yet he dared give no order, for the direction chosen might easily take them further to sea. He glanced at Red Mark whom he knew to be a seafaring man, but the Saxon's face showed him nothing.

At last he turned to me. I was younger than any other aboard but had come from a coast where all boys grow up knowing the ways of the sea.

“Which way did the wind take us?” he asked. “Where lies the land?”

My chance had come even sooner than I had dared hope.

“Tell me...*quickly!*”

“No.”

The veins in his neck swelled. He gestured for Mesha and the whip. “We’ll have it from you or you back in ribbons!” he threatened. “I’ll—”

“If that whip touches me, I shall die before I speak one word. Death is better than this.” I paused. “But you can make me pilot.”

“*What?*”

Without the strong wine I might have lacked the nerve, but I think not, for I was my father’s son.

Leaning on my oar, I said, “Why waste me here? Had I been pilot you would have no worries now. You would not have drunk wine. Why waste a Kerbouchard at an oar?”

Angrily, he turned his back and strode away, and when I looked around, Red Mark was grinning. “Now why didn’t I think of that? But if you become pilot, will you forget us?”

“I shall forget nothing. I must wait my chance.”

The clouds grew darker, and wind lay strong upon the sea. Waves crested and spat angry spray. The galley rolled heavily and shipped a small sea over the bow, the water rushing back and gurgling in the scuppers. Walther’s face had turned green, and the crewmen were shaking in their wet breeches.

Walther walked back to me. “You shall try, and if you fail, you shall be hung head down from the bows until you die.”

He turned to Mesha. “Strike the shackles.”

When the chains fell from me, I stood and stretched wide my arms. It was good to be free. Then I turned upon the round-faced oaf who had stolen my knife. “Give me the blade!” I said.

He laughed scornfully. “Give you—? By the Gods, I’ll—”

I kicked him viciously on the kneecap, and when he howled in anguish and bent to grasp his knee, I doubled my fist and struck down like a hammer on his kidney. He screamed and went to the deck on his knees. Reaching down, I took the knife from his belt.

“You will need a slave to take my place,” I said. “There he is!”

Walther stared at me, hatred ugly in his small eyes. I knew then he would never be content until I lay dead at his feet.

“Take us to shore,” he said sullenly, and walked from me. However, a few minutes later the moonfaced man was shackled in my place.

Chapter 2

NO MAN UPON that deck was my friend, nor would I long survive unless I proved they could not do without me.

Returning to the coast presented no problem. No doubt several of those still in chains could have done as well. It was my good fortune to have spoken first, a lesson to be remembered.

Much debris littered the deck after their carousing, and once the galley was on course, I began cleaning up. Nor had I chosen a course that would take us immediately to the coast; I used every device to make it seem difficult.

Standing by the bulwark, I consulted the water, then I looked at the clouds. Then I wet my finger and held it up to get the direction of the wind, although it was obvious enough. Pacing the deck, I suddenly acted as if a decision had been made, and taking the tiller from the man on watch, I used my own hands to guide the ship.

Later, I relinquished the tiller to a crewman and went about making the place shipshape. Walther watched me suspiciously but approved.

When land was again in sight, I held myself ready, prepared to fight rather than return to the oar, but my arguments must have impressed Walther, for he left me alone.

There were sixteen oars to a side and two men to each oar. There was a deck forward and a deck aft with narrow decks along the bulwarks above the heads of the galley slaves. Down the center where Mesha walked, it was open to the sky, and as he walked, his head was above the level of the deck. Constructed for coastal trade, she had cargo space fore and aft and more beneath Mesha's walk. She was slow and clumsy but seaworthy.

Aside from the slaves, sixty-two men made up the crew, and the number made it necessary to be constantly raiding to renew supplies. Originally, the vessel had probably been handled by no more than twelve men aside from slaves. Walther and his men feared to attack unless the advantage was obviously on their side. Several times they ventured close to a strong craft, but each time they sheered off and abandoned the attack.

Working about the deck, cleaning up, mending rigging, and maneuvering the craft, I began to plan.

Red Mark must be freed.

The Moors on the seat before Red Mark were good men, and there was another Moor near the stern whom I had not seen before. He was a strong, agile-looking man, unbroken by either Mesha's lash or the labor. He was a narrow-faced man with intensely black eyes and a hard, decisive look about him.

Contriving to drop some rope yarns near him, I bent to retrieve them and whispered, "You have a friend."

"By Allah," he said wryly, "I can use one! I am Selim."

Walking away, I felt Mesha's eyes upon me. He could have heard nothing but was suspicious by nature. He liked me not, nor I him, and the memory of his lash lay hot within my skull.

Young though I was, I knew the dangers a coward can offer, for his fear will often drive him to kill more quickly than if he were a brave man. Walther and his crew were cowards, and whatever must be done must be with care, for among them were a few good fighting men.

The crew liked me not at all. Occasionally, they vented their fury with words, but I ventured no replies, biding my time. I think they feared me because of my sudden rise and my decisive move against the man who had taken my knife. They feared what they did not understand.

Twice, they captured fisher boats, attacking lustily with swinging swords when the odds were seven or eight to one. And then, off the Mediterranean coast of Spain, they made a grand capture, and the fault was mine.

The sky had been blue that morning, and the air breathless, the sea smooth as glass. While busily splicing a line, I felt a sudden dampness. Suddenly, we were shrouded in fog, moving like a ghost ship through the mist.

A few minutes before the fog closed down I had glimpsed a merchantman sailing a course parallel to our own. Now, after a few minutes within the fog, I heard a faint creaking as of rigging, the slap of a loose sail, and a gurgle of water about a hull.

For what happened I have only myself to blame. I hated Walther and all his bloody, misbegotten crew, yet there was in me the blood of corsairs.

Walther came to stand beside me. "You heard something?"

"A ship," I said, "and not one of your scrawny fish boats but a fat, rich merchantman out of Alexandria or Palermo."

The glitter of greed was in his eyes. He touched his fat lips with his tongue. "They would be strong," he muttered, "we could not—"

“Why not?” I spoke with contempt for such fears. “Only one man was on deck when the fog closed in, and half the crew may be asleep. There was a storm last night, and they would be tired. Before they could organize resistance it would be over.”

For once greed overcame caution. Grabbing a crewman, he sent him for others, and at his order began to edge the vessel closer. Fifty men gathered along the bulwarks, keeping themselves out of sight.

Water slapped her hull, rigging creaked. We shipped our starboard oars, and the watchman on the deck came quickly to his ship’s side, alarmed by the sound.

He saw us; his mouth opened to scream a warning, but an arrow transfixed his throat, and then other men were scrambling over their side. There was shouting then, a clash of arms, a scream of mortal agony.

That was the moment I had chosen to shear off and escape, but the chance was lost in the instant of my birth, for Walther was beside me, a sword point in my ribs as if he had guessed my intent. I dared not make no move.

The surprise attack had been a complete success. The merchantman’s crew awakened only to die. Moreover, the ship was well-found, with a rich cargo of silk and cinnamon. There was gold and silver coin...and a girl.

She struggled to the ship’s side, the prisoner of Cervon, a huge Gaul, the largest man in our crew. Beside her an older man pleaded and argued with the Gaul. Her eyes, wide with terror, looked across the rails of the two ships into mine. She could have been no more than sixteen and was very beautiful. Her eyes met mine, pleading and frightened.

“Stop him,” I protested to Walther.

“He captured her. She is his.”

There was envy in his tone, for he hated to see such a girl in the arms of another. It was an envy that could be used.

“You would waste such a girl? That is no shepherd’s daughter! Would you throw away a fortune for a moment in the scuppers? Can’t you see? This girl is worth more than all the loot combined! Think what her family would pay!”

Greed won where any other argument would have failed. The Gaul was pressing her against the bulwark and fending off the older man with one hand. Even at this distance it could be seen that her flesh was soft and her dress woven with threads of gold.

A fortune-hungry and jealous man, Walther seized the chance. “Stop!” he shouted to the Gaul. “Bring her here, and the man as well!”

The older man spotted Walther and leaned over the rail of their ship. “We can pay, and pay

handsomely if the girl is unharmed.”

Cervon hesitated, angry, but found no sympathy, for envy as well as the idea of profit had turned the crew against him. Angrily, he swung her over the side and dropped her to our deck, where we were lashed alongside. He left the man to find his own way, and went away, disgruntled and furious.

Already our crew was looting the vessel of both cargo and supplies. Bales and barrels came over the side, as the men stripped the vessel hurriedly, for fear a warship might intervene before the looting was complete.

The girl threw a glance my way and spoke to the older man beside her who also looked my way. Knowing I had spoken for her gave her more hope than the moment deserved. Yet I smiled at her, and she smiled in return.

When all attention was diverted by the stripping of the prize, I spoke softly to her, in Arabic. “Friend,” I said.

The fog thinned, and our crew hurriedly abandoned the captured ship.

Ignoring the complaints of Cervon, Walther turned to the man. “Who are you? What can you pay?”

The man was not so old as at first he had seemed. He was well set up, a man of military bearing, gray of hair but clear of eye, and obviously accustomed to command. He had formed a quick estimate of Walther, and expected no mercy from the others.

“She is the daughter of ibn-Sharaz, of Palermo, a wealthy man, and one with power.”

“She has not the Moorish look,” Walther grumbled. “I think you lie.”

“Her mother was Circassian, blonde as your northern girls. Treat her gently. If she is harmed, fifty ships will hunt you down.”

“Fifty ships? For a slip of a girl?”

The man was brusque. “Fifty ships for the daughter of ibn-Sharaz, friend and adviser to William of Sicily!”

Walther paled. He had none of the sea rover’s disdain for landlubber princes, although even a corsair might hesitate at the name of William of Sicily, descendant of Norman conquerors, his ship upon every sea, his spies in every port.

“Such a man can pay,” Walther admitted, but speaking as much to advise his crew as to acknowledge the fact.

“Take us safely to any port in Spain, and you will be paid well and what you have done forgotten.”

Of the first I was convinced, of the second I was not. This man and his kind were not likely to forgive such an injury, and I remembered the story my father had told me of the young Julius Caesar

taken by pirates. He promised to return after his ransom was paid, and hang them every one, and they laughed. Yet he did return, and he did hang them, and this man was of such a kind.

Walther strode off to discuss the matter with the crew, and the man spoke to me. “You have helped us. I value such aid.”

“My word carries small weight here. Until recently I was chained to an oar. They neither like nor trust me.”

“They listened to you.”

“They are ruled by greed and envy. Each wanted her for himself, and hence was willing to listen when I suggested ransom.”

“Remain our friend, and I shall replace the weight of your chains with an equal weight of gold.”

When one is young, one does not think of gold but only of the light in a maiden’s eyes. Yet a time would come when I would discover that one might have both—if one had wit.

Never had I seen such a girl. Our northern girls were stronger but their skin less fine from exposure to sun and wind, and they lacked garments such as she wore on this day. My father’s house had been filled with treasures looted from eastern ships, and often he had spoken of the life in Moorish Spain where I longed to go.

Our northern castles were cold, drafty halls with narrow windows and few comforts, their floors scattered with straw and the accumulated refuse of months. My father had brought from Moorish Spain a love of beauty and cleanliness. So, accustomed to my own home, I could not abide the ill-smelling castles of nobles who had little but weapons and pride.

The old Crusaders learned a little, but merchants and minstrels had picked up the Moorish habit of bathing, changing their clothing instead of allowing it to wear out and drop off. Occasionally, travelers brought books to their homes. But books of any kind were rare in the land of the Franks, and the few available were eagerly read—but read only in private for fear the church might disapprove.

My father, not an educated man in the sense I was later to understand, was intelligent and observant and like most of Brittany at the time was pagan rather than Christian. Christianity, for which my father had the greatest respect, had discarded much that was good along with the bad. The baths had been symbols of paganism, so baths and bathing were condemned, and few people bathed in Europe for nearly a thousand years. Books had been thrown out on the theory that if they repeated what the Bible said, they were unnecessary, and if they said what was not in the Bible, they were untrue.

Travel, ever an enlightening influence, had revealed to my father a more agreeable way of life. He had learned to appreciate the seasoned and carefully prepared food of the Mediterranean countries as well as their silken garments. The first rugs seen in Armorica were brought home by rovers of the seas, and many of the first books, also. Two of those brought to our house were Latin; another was Arabic.

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